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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 KHARTOUM 000385

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DEPARTMENT FOR AF A/S FRAZER, S/E WILLIAMSON, AF/SPG, AND
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SUBJECT: NEW CHADIAN REBEL OFFENSIVE BREWING IN WEST DARFUR

REF: A. KHARTOUM 00267

1B. KHARTOUM 00311

1C. KHARTOUM 00297

1D. KHARTOUM 00300

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Alberto M. Fernandez. Reasons: Section
s 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

11. (C) A new attempt to overthrow Chadian President Idriss Deby's government is brewing in West Darfur, UN officials, humanitarian workers, and Chadian rebel commanders told Poloffs in El Geneina between March 11 and 13. Though predictions on the start date for the next attempt to topple Deby's government range from a few days to several weeks, it is clear that the rebels remain as strong--if not stronger--than during their February offensive into N'djamena. Credible estimates place the number of opposition fighters in West Darfur at 6,000, augmented by up to 4,000 Sudanese Arab militiamen. While ethnic rivalries among the factions persist, hatred of Deby, rejection of political dialogue, confidence in their ability to overthrow the Chadian regime, and (at least public) espousal of pro-Western, democratic ideals keep three of the movements in a tenuous "National Alliance" and dismissive of the recent agreement signed between Deby and Sudanese President Bashir in Dakar. A fourth movement--the Rally of Forces for Change (RFC)--plans to "occupy" territory while the National Alliance topples the Chadian government and then negotiate with the transitional regime. When the next offensive occurs, predict UN and NGO sources, the greatest impact in West Darfur will be on the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) rebel movement rather than on the overall security environment or humanitarian operations. End summary.

Continuing the Fight

12. (C) Despite the recent agreement signed by Presidents Bashir and Deby in Dakar, El Geneina, West Darfur is awash with men poised for an imminent incursion into Chad. Most

wear camouflage or fatigues; many sport red berets stolen from the Chadian military or dark green & battle turbans.⁸ All are armed. Technicals parade through the streets loaded with weapons--rocket-propelled grenades stacked three-feet deep in the truck beds and strapped to the sides of the doors and the hoods. El Geneina-based UN and NGO contacts, however, indicate that the number of Chadian rebels present in the town has actually decreased in recent days, an indication of an impending offensive as fighters move to tactical assembly areas closer to the border.

¶3. (C) "We will continue our fight, and history will judge us," Oumar Ali, a commander in the Front du Salut de la Republique (FSC) led by Ahmed Soubian and the former prefect of Toba, told Poloffs on March 12. "There is no security, no real democracy in Chad," said Ali. He detailed a litany of Deby's transgressions: constitutional revisions to maintain his grip on power, the execution of opposition political figures, rampant corruption, destruction of traditional tribal structures, exploitation of children and other criminal activities. Ali also alleged that Deby was responsible for &creating⁸ the Darfur conflict and has supported "mercenaries" to destabilize regimes in Sudan, Congo, and the Central African Republic.

¶4. (C) Mohammed Aboud, the secretary general of the Union des Forces de la Democratie et du Developement--Fondamental (UFDD/F) of Abdelwahid Aboud, concurred with Ali's assessment of Deby's autocratic government and anticipated that Deby would never adhere to a negotiated settlement. "One day he's signing an agreement, and the next, he's sending 100 vehicles across the border into Sudan," said Aboud.

Military Strength

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¶5. (C) "Thousands" of Chadian rebels are massed in West Darfur and concentrated in the least populated areas, the head of the UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) in El Geneina told Poloffs on March 13. In addition to the opposition's traditional strongholds in Habila, Fora Burunga, and Umm Dukun, 2,500 rebels affiliated with Timan Erdimi's Rally of Forces for Change (RFC) are stationed in Bir Siliba and an additional 3,000 to 4,000--likely affiliated with Mahamet Nouri's UFDD, Aboud's UFDD/F, and Soubian's FSC--are assembled 15 kilometers South of El Geneina in Wadi Rati. UNDSS alleges that the RFC is the single most potent military force because Sudan disarmed the UFDD of heavy weapons before allowing Nouri's fighters to cross back into Sudan after the failed rebel offensive in February.

¶6. (C) Since March 11, 4,000 Arab militiamen affiliated with Mahariya commander Mohammed Hamdan (aka "Hameti") also arrived in Wadi Rati, another UNDSS source said. A former "Janjaweed" leader, the mercurial Hameti defected from the Sudanese Government in December but has since renewed his alliance with Khartoum (Ref. A). An NGO operating throughout West Darfur confirmed that they have received reports of the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) "actively recruiting" among the Sudanese Arab population to augment the Chadian rebels. (Note: In a March 16 communication, UNDSS reported that Hameti entered Chad on or around March 15. End note.)

¶7. (C) UNDSS accounts of the numbers of fighters differ, however, from the rebels' own reports. Aboud estimated that the UFDD commands 3,000 fighters, the UFDD/F 2,000 fighters, and the RFC 600. Nouri, Abdelwahid Aboud, and Soubian are in Chad, according to their supporters. Erdimi is in Khartoum. (Note: In a March 15 meeting with Poloff in Khartoum, to be reported septel, Erdimi said that the combined forces of Nouri, Aboud, and Soubian numbered 3,000 and counted his own forces as slightly less than this figure. End note.) All of

these numbers may be exaggerated.

Lessons Learned from February?

¶ 8. (C) As the rebels, focus remains on a military solution, they claim to have learned lessons from their rapid but unsuccessful march on N'djamena in February. Both Ali and Aboud said that the next offensive will proceed more gradually, with the movements consolidating their gains as they advance from East to West--beginning with the seizure of Abeche--before they launch a final push on the capital.

¶ 9. (C) Ali predicted that the Chadian military will fold as quickly as it did in February and that many of the rank-and-file are prepared to defect. Deby's cabinet is also restive, said Ali, with at least seven ministers expressing covert support for the opposition. Asked about the French military presence in Chad, Aboud boasted &we know how to combat the French.⁸ Ali later echoed this sentiment, dismissing the new UN-backed EU Force (EUFOR) as irrelevant in affecting the military intentions of armed Chadian opposition groups.

¶ 10. (C) UN assessments characterize Deby's government as "weak" and "shaky" yet question whether the opposition will take a methodical approach to the offensive. "They won't go systematically," anticipated one UNDSS officer in El Geneina. "It's just not in their nature. Once they cross, it will be another rush to N'djamena."

Ethnic Divisions

¶ 11. (C) While the movements also recognize that tribal divisions crippled their February attempt to unseat Deby, relations among the factions remain colored by ethnic rivalries. Aboud and Ali (and, in the later conversation in Khartoum, Erdimi) confirmed earlier reports that Sudan had ordered the rebel movements to coalesce around the more malleable Nouri (Ref. B). Aboud said that while "it is not

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in our interests to bring Nouri to power," the UFDD/F signed an accord on February 25 agreeing to allow Nouri to assume the Chadian presidency for six months until a "national forum" is held to prepare for elections. Ali said that the FSC agreed to a "National Alliance" with the UFDD and UFDD/F, placing Nouri in the lead political role and Soubian as his deputy.

¶ 12. (C) Both Aboud and Ali said that Erdimi's RFC rejected Nouri as the presumptive leader, even for an interim period. Ali scoffed at the suggestion that Erdimi could assume the presidency after Deby's fall. "We think of Chad," he said, "and he thinks of the Zaghawa." Though opposed to Erdimi's overall leadership, Ali noted that "if Deby leaves, we will have no problem with the Zaghawa." (Note: In the March 15 meeting with Poloff in Khartoum, Erdimi said that he would not participate in joint "combat operations" with the National Alliance to overthrow Deby's government. Instead, when hostilities begin, he plans to "occupy" as much territory as possible and then "negotiate" with the transitional government to secure a formidable role for the RFC in a new regime. End note.)

Political Dialogue Futile

¶ 13. (C) None of the rebel movements are interested in political dialogue with Deby's government, said the opposition leaders, because Deby's regime is irredeemable and cannot be trusted to abide by a peace agreement. Ali

cited the example of former rebel leader Mohammed Nour as a cautionary tale of someone who signed an agreement with Deby and then became isolated and marginalized. "We will never talk to Deby," Ali said. "Never."

¶14. (C) Aboud and Ali decried AU mediation efforts led by Libya and Congo as unacceptable and less than neutral. "Qaddafi is the biggest terrorist in the world," said Ali. "Why did France and the U.S. allow his mediation when he backs Deby?" The FSC refused to participate in Libyan-sponsored negotiations in the fall of 2007 because of Tripoli's pro-Deby bias, despite a push from Khartoum to sign the agreement that emerged. The absence of criticism from the West for Deby's human rights abuses have also cast doubt on the international community's willingness to guarantee a political settlement. (Note: Erdimi told Poloff on March 15 that Deby rejected his overture for negotiations. Senior Assistant to the President Minni Minawi, a fellow Zaghawa who is in regular contact with Erdimi (Ref. B), disputed this assertion, saying that while Deby is open to dialogue, Erdimi's demands--the post of prime minister and retention of his forces--are unrealistic. End note.)

Chad After Deby

¶15. (C) Confident of their impending victory over Deby, the rebels share a vision for a Chad after his fall. Aboud and Ali said that the opposition will install an interim government, with Nouri at its head for six months, and hold a "national forum" of opposition parties and civil society groups that will include the participation of international observers. The rebels propose that the national forum prepare for elections supervised by the UN. "If Deby leaves, we will give up our arms and participate in the national forum," said Ali. He added that the movements seek to build a "national army" rather than one dominated by a single ethnic group.

¶16. (C) Mildly attributing French support for Deby to the fact that "France doesn't understand our interests," Ali was nonetheless unsparing in his judgment of French President Sarkozy, whom he characterized as "illegitimate" and blamed for cooperating with Deby to organize "the Zoe's Ark Mafia's kidnapping of children." He criticized EUFOR as a farce to protect Deby's government that is "85 percent French." Ali suggested that if the West wants to protect Chadian civilians, it should welcome the collapse of Deby's regime, "which exploits the population and kills refugees."

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¶17. (C) Ali stressed that the FSC does not support an extremist ideology. "We're against the Islamists," he said, stressing Soubian's bona fides as a pro-Western technocrat: a former Chadian Ambassador to the U.S. whose three daughters hold U.S. citizenship; a founder of the Mouvement Patriotique du Salut (MPS); and a former minister of administration. "We want the U.S. and France to be the friends of the Chadian people." Among the FSC's principal political aims is to re-institute the provisions of the 1996 constitution. The movement respects international "rules," said Ali, and will welcome humanitarian organizations in Chad. He predicted that after Deby's fall, France will "adjust" its policy toward the opposition.

Implications for Sudan

¶18. (C) A renewed incursion into Chad will have a greater impact on the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) rebel group's ability to confront the Sudanese Government than on the overall security situation in West Darfur or on the operation of humanitarian operations in West Darfur, UN and

NGO representatives asserted. Aboud, Ali, and UNDSS expressed doubts that Khartoum will use the Chadian opposition to combat JEM in Darfur, and UNDSS called reports of such a tactic "JEM propaganda." "They won't want to damage the Chadian opposition by pitting them against JEM," said one UN official. Others fear that settling accounts with JEM will translate into all-out vengeance by Khartoum against the troublesome but relatively small Zaghawa tribe (both in Chad and Sudan) who make up the backbone of most Darfur's rebel fighters.

Comment

¶19. (C) There is no indication that the recent agreement signed between Deby and President Bashir in Dakar will prevent or even delay a large-scale offensive by the Chadian opposition although the rapid implementation of a border monitoring mechanism could be helpful (it may be too late for this offensive though), when and if that happens. During S/E Williamson's recent visit to Sudan, he cautioned senior NCP officials, including President Bashir, that a new attack on Deby's regime will derail any discussion of improving the U.S.-Sudan bilateral relationship (Refs. C and D). As an offensive looms on the horizon--possibly including the participation of powerful if untrustworthy Sudanese Arab militias (we have our doubts about how much fighting in Chad Hameti is actually interested in doing and expect that they will hover around the border) --we must repeatedly underscore our resolve on this issue to the Sudanese regime in clear, unequivocal terms while encouraging Deby to curb his own excesses and neutralize some of these rebels who were part of his government, or, in Erdimi's case, his own family. The Khartoum regime continues to fish in Chad's troubled waters, funding, arming and encouraging Chad's rebels (as Deby does with JEM). The one thing Khartoum did not do was create them and the domestic circumstances that give them a chance at seizing power. End comment.

¶20. (SBU) Below is contact information for Chadian opposition members from the FSC, the UFDD/F and the RFC:

--Oumar Ali, Commander, FSC: 88 216 213 36015, 249 1 294 91534

--Mohammed Aboud, Secretary General, UFDD/F: 249 9 253 53751

--Timan Erdimi, President, RFC: 249 9 145 17482, 88 216 219 674688

¶21. (U) Tripoli minimize considered.
FERNANDEZ